



These things we do that others may live to return with honor

by Major Chadwick J. Sterr, USAF

It was November 14, 2010 when the United States Air Force Combat Search and Rescue forces were scrambled to an incident in Wataphur Valley, Afghanistan. An ambushed US Army patrol was wounded with life-threatening injuries, and the Joint Personnel Recovery Center needed a Guardian Angel team to respond. An HH-60 Pave Hawk infiltrated a Combat Rescue Officer (CRO) and Pararescueman (PJ) before the threat of enemy fire forced the helicopter to depart. The team moved to the patients, established a casualty collection point, and the PJ began treating nine injured personnel. While sustaining and returning enemy fire, the CRO coordinated support from F-16s, AH-64s, HH-60s, OH-58s, and RQ-1 aircraft stacked overhead and developed an extraction plan. With the enemy neutralized, the rescue vehicles returned to pick-up the patients and Guardian Angel team. The comment from the CRO involved with this mission represents the entire career field: "I am thankful for the men that served by my side that day and that we all came home to continue the good fight 'that others may live to return with honor.'"

Presidential policy directs an enhanced responsiveness of existing personnel recovery capabilities to counter and diminish the global threat of Americans being taken hostage or becoming isolated. Specially trained Airmen and their unique equipment enable the Air Force to present flexible solutions to the President. Lieutenant General Allen Peck, the Air University Commander, echoed this requirement: "Our personnel recovery forces need to be organized, trained, and equipped to operate across the full range of military operations, including humanitarian operations, irregular warfare, and conventional warfare." The Air Force has recognized Personnel Recovery (PR) as a service core function with dedicated forces such as Combat Rescue Officers



(CRO). This year, the Air Force commemorates 10 years of CROs rescuing anyone, anywhere, anytime and returning them with honor.

Former Secretary of the Air Force Whit Peters, the key visionary and driver behind the CRO concept said, “We recognize how vital the personnel recovery and combat rescue missions have become in our expeditionary aerospace force concept. The ability to bring people home safely from dangerous missions is paramount. Establishing a career field devoted to this mission will ensure that attention is always focused on this commitment.” This commitment dates back to April 1966 when Pararescueman William Pitsenbarger gave his life aiding and defending a unit of soldiers pinned down by an enemy assault in Vietnam.

The Combat Rescue Officer career field was created on December 8, 2000, the same day A1C Pitsenbarger’s Medal of Honor was presented to his father. Secretary Peters and Air Force Chief of Staff General Michael Ryan directed these officers lead and command combat rescue operations as direct combatants while providing personnel recovery (PR) expertise. “There isn’t a nobler mission in the DoD,” said First Lt Salvatore Sferrazza, a CRO currently deployed to save lives and aid the injured in Afghanistan.



The career field visionaries, Gen “Doc” Fogelsong, Maj Gen Michael Kudlacz, and CMSgt Paul Miller were joined by a hand-selected initial cadre. Then HH-60 pilot Lt Col Thomas Phillips and Special Tactics Officers Maj Vincent Savino and Maj Paul “Terry” Johnson were given specific guidance to construct a program to ensure CRO billets were at MAJCOM and HQ staffs performing duties as PR mission planners and providing expertise to commanders and battle staffs concerning PR operations and activities. The Air Force’s PR experts would be dedicated to executing with, and advocating for, the Pararescue and SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape) Specialist enlisted career fields. While Lt Col Phillips coordinated programming efforts, Maj Savino and Maj Johnson activated the 38th Rescue Squadron at Moody Air Force Base on May 7, 2001. Maj Johnson later activated the 58th Rescue Squadron at Nellis Air Force Base on August 1, 2002. The 31st Rescue Squadron activated July 31, 2003 at Kadena Air Base, Japan, and the 48th Rescue Squadron activated June 25, 2004 at Davis-

Monthan Air Force Base. All four units are now under the command of lieutenant colonel Combat Rescue Officers. How was this possible in just 10 years?

The initial cadre started a Combat Rescue Officer selection program in 2001 based on their brethren Special Tactics Officer selection program. This process identifies candidates that possess critical individual characteristics required to provide leadership during combat rescue operations across a diverse spectrum of insertion and extraction capabilities as well as enemy, environmental, and geographic threat considerations. Candidates must be able to assess situations quickly and develop and implement decisions under the stressors imposed by high levels of personal discomfort and the responsibility associated with personnel recovery and



rescue mission profiles. The initial skills training required to become a fully qualified Combat Rescue Officer in the United States Air Force is now comprised of 12 formal courses including CRO indoctrination, combat diver, airborne, military freefall, combat survival, underwater egress, water survival, and CRO advanced SERE, culminating with the AFSC-awarding CRO Course. Qualifying as a Team Commander is the final step before a CRO is considered fully operational.

In order to insure the highest probability of successful completion in this arduous training program, candidates are selected during a two-phase process consisting of a board review of the application and a one-week field evaluation. Applicants range from enlisted through company grade officer, to include cadets. These candidates are screened for mental fortitude and physical capabilities. This program reduces attrition by ensuring those officers selected are inherently equipped to succeed in the specific mental and physical challenges of the CRO training pipeline. Candidates selected from Phase II have achieved a 97% indoctrination course success rate. The program graduated 165 CROs from a pool of 562 total applications over the last 10 years with 36 candidates currently completing the 12-18 month training pipeline. Lieutenant Sferrazza provides the following advice for these new CROs and those interested in the career field: "Be a student of the sport. Read, learn, and study everything you can about your job. We will never be finished learning. Study just as much on rope



systems as jumping and diving, just as much on combat leadership as civil rescue and reintegration, and just as much on aircraft tactics as non-conventional rescue and sister service operations. Open your studying to new topics that relate to our mission both directly and indirectly.”

Male enlisted personnel, cadets, and officers interested in cross-training or completing an inter-service transfer must be eligible to obtain a top-secret security clearance; volunteer for hazardous military duties that include parachuting, marine diving, and mission aircrew; and qualify for a USAF Class III Flight Physical in accordance with AFI 48-123. Current Department of Defense direct combatant policies preempt females from entering the career field.



“Once past the long and difficult selection and initial training process, a Combat Rescue Officer's real challenge begins,” said Col Michael Slojkowski, a CRO assigned to the Joint Irregular Warfare Center. “Leading and caring for his men and their families, through training and deployments is often more challenging than that grueling selection and initial training process. Continuing operational and training missions expose him and his men to significant risk and often required long absences from home.

The decision to become a CRO should be made after a comprehensive look at all of the internal and external factors, not just the personal motivations and desires of the individual. Parents, spouses, and children often experience more anxieties and pressures than the service member. Those that become fully aware of all of the commitments and challenges of being a CRO find that the mission of saving lives is even more exciting and rewarding when shared with their families and fellow rescue airmen.” Further information can be obtained by contacting the CRO Selection Program Manager at (757) 764-8170 or cro.selection@langley.af.mil.



The Air Force designated Guardian Angel as a non-aircraft weapon system on June 3, 2003 to assign CRO, Pararescue, and SERE Specialist capabilities to better meet requirements to organize, train, equip, and present forces to the geographic combatant commands. By April 2006, the active duty force was joined by the Air Reserve component.

The Air National Guard activated the 103rd, 131st, and 212th Guardian Angel Rescue Squadrons while Air Force Reserve Command activated the 304th, 306th, and 308th Guardian Angel Rescue Squadrons. Together, these ten squadrons have conducted personnel recovery and rescue operations for every geographic combatant command while continuing to develop, test, and field a combat weapon system. Lt Col Thomas Stephens, 212th Rescue Squadron Commander, highlights how he has integrated with active duty and reserve forces on Joint Base Elmendorf Richardson. “We have a CRO in the rescue coordination center working for the 11th Air Force commander during the prosecution of a mission like the recent F-22 crash. Integrating our schedules with the AFRC F-22s enabled us to have crews on alert when the aircraft was lost, drastically cutting the response time. Additionally, CROs are partnering with the C-17 Classic Associate Unit to posture for a quick response across the vast PACAF area of responsibility when the call comes in for rescue.”

Captain Joseph Barnard was the first CRO to deploy in November 2001 to the US Central Command (CENTCOM) Joint Personnel Recovery Center: “9/11 set me off and the desire to serve filled my veins. I learned a lot and being in the AOC at war makes you proud to be in the



Air Force!” A month later, Maj Terry Johnson was the first CRO to deploy tactically in response to the 9/11 attacks. Eventually, the 38th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron activated in Jordan to provide rescue capabilities for Operation Iraqi Freedom. Today, the 82nd Expeditionary Rescue Squadron in Djibouti and the 46th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron in Afghanistan provide personnel recovery and rescue capabilities to ongoing Operation Enduring Freedom activities.

“The ability for an officer, any officer, to perform the tasks of his assigned airmen and understand their mission in depth provides the foundation for their credibility as leaders. Our CROs, working alongside the heroic PJs of our CSAR (Combat Search and Rescue) forces, are true combat warriors-leaders,” said Lt Gen Mike Hostage, US Air Forces Central commander. There are deployment requirements that combine the CRO with rescue teams



in the field and assignments to Joint Personnel Recovery Centers and Personnel Recovery Coordination Cells around the globe. These taskings are above and beyond the 123 active duty positions across 54 different organizations to include multiple SERE school positions, which is up 23% from the 2001 programmed authorizations. With over 20% of the total career field tasked at any given time and the demand for CROs continually increasing, this stressed career field has been identified to receive a critical skills retention bonus.

As Team Commanders, CROs have been leading rescue and recovery operations since February 2002 when then Lt Matthew McGuinness provided airborne command during a rescue team combat freefall insertion to recover a wounded Australian Special Air Serviceman in the middle of a minefield during Operation Enduring Freedom. Then Capt Brian Gebo later executed the



first CRO combat freefall into the Hindu Kush. His team recovered eight United Nations personnel stranded after their helicopter crashed at 13,300 feet in October 2004. Since then, CROs have led combat operations to rescue downed Naval and Air Force aviators, conducted recovery operations for an Army OH-58 in the Tigris River, and performed rescue diving in the Indian Ocean off the Horn of Africa to recover aircrew from Marine CH-53 helicopters.

Combat Rescue Officers are currently leading rescue and recovery operations of US, coalition, and civilian personnel across Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Horn of Africa.

The teams have conducted over 7000 missions to date in 2010 resulting in over 1400 lives saved and 2100 life-saving assists. Captain Nicholas Morgans offered the following from his deployed location, "The CRO spectrum is broad; from personnel recovery and casualty evacuation to reintegration and training. I've only experienced a small piece, but whether it's bringing home a fallen hero or saving the life of a double amputee, words just can't describe the internal rewards. Being a cross-trainee, I've seen what the Air Force has to offer an officer. In all aspects of leadership, getting in the fight, and job satisfaction, I'm convinced that I have the greatest job in the world." Yet the loss of Capt Joel Gentz in June 2010 while conducting operations from the same



GUARDIAN ANGEL

"That Others May Live... To Return With Honor"

location where Capt Morgans is serving in Afghanistan reminds these operators that the threat is real, demanding their lives, if necessary, so that others may live to return with honor.



CROs are mission-proven during humanitarian assistance and disaster response operations as well. They have commanded the Guardian Angel Expeditionary Rescue Teams activated for Joint Task Force Katrina, conducting 4267 airborne and 39 watercraft recoveries in and around New Orleans. They led responses to the 2006 Pakistan earthquake and the recent disaster in Haiti. High-altitude rescues on Mount Hood and across the remote

Alaskan expanse join freefall drops to freighters in the open ocean to save lives and aid the injured. As Capt McGuinness explains, “Our benefit at the tactical level is unprecedented as a leader in our mission area and advocate for the Pararescuemen and SERE Specialists. The unique ground-centric focus of the CRO completes the rescue circle for the Air Force.”

Returning personnel with honor to their units and families is a critical part of the PR cycle. CROs have joined SERE Specialists to ensure commanders place a priority on the reintegration process by constructing teams ready to receive rescued personnel. CROs were intricately involved during the reintegration of soldiers from the 1st of the 277th Aviation Regiment following their POW recoveries. CROs prepared Marine CH-53 aircrew of Condor 11 and Naval F-18 aircrew for honorable return after their aircraft went down in 2005 and 2006 respectively. Coalition and United States Agency for International Development personnel benefited from a



CRO-led reintegration process in February 2004. American civilians experienced the positive impact of the reintegration process after CROs facilitated their inclusion in the process. Contractor Thomas Hamill and journalist Jill Carroll were reunited with their families after being held hostage in 2004 and 2006, respectively. Lt Col Jason Pifer, commander of the 48th Rescue Squadron said this about reintegrating Thomas Hamill: “It was one of the most rewarding and cherished experiences of my AF career. Helping a fellow American and his spouse work through a traumatic experience and prepare them to successfully reunite with loved ones, community, and civilian job is beyond words. It taught me a tremendous amount

about humanity and human nature, and just how fragile we all really are. It was also extremely rewarding to watch our DoD SERE Psychologists and USAF SERE Specialists execute their unique skills for the betterment of that individual. I truly believe I am more of a well-rounded Rescue officer because of that experience.”

“Experienced officers are now leading in the PR community, and not only from a tactical perspective but with a focus on the operational and strategic aspects,” said retired CMSgt Paul Miller. “A vision takes time to fully develop, but CROs are adding value today. Our vision in December 2000 remains today: that CROs can and will be the joint integrator for PR in the future. A CRO's focus is not a certain area of land or water, a platform, or even solely a service but they exhibit the true values of Service before Self and Excellence in all they do, guided by a warrior ethos of ‘These Things We Do That Others May Live To Return With Honor.’ Being integrated with the rest of the USAF Personnel Recovery (Rescue) Force, they are a force to be reckoned with globally. I'm proud I had a part in the establishment of this career field and look forward to reading about their accomplishment in the future.”



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